

The Syntax of Mauritian Creole
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While the syntax of ‘Standard’ languages is a vastly studied theme, detailed analyses of the syntax of Creole languages are still very rare, in particular those couched within current theoretical frameworks. ‘The Syntax of Mauritian Creole’ by Anand Syea addresses this lacuna in the literature. It is the first work to approach a wide range of grammatical aspects of Mauritian Creole (MC) from a minimalist perspective, including but not limited to tense, mood and aspect (TMA) markers, the expression of negation, verb complementation, interrogatives and nominal structure. The vast amount of data considered is in and of itself highly valuable, providing the reader with a rich empirical illustration of the language. In addition, the discussion of this data is often clear and easy to follow, rendering the work accessible not only to seasoned linguists but also to graduate students. Syea’s comprehensive description of MC, the result of 20 years of research, is a very welcome contribution to the field of linguistics and will appeal to researchers working on syntax and Creole languages.

The book is divided into 7 chapters, as well as an index and bibliography. Chapter 1 provides the introduction, stating the overall aim, scope and structure of the ensuing chapters. It also sketches crucial background concepts for the research, be they from minimalist theory (e.g. merge, copy, feature checking) or theories of Creole genesis (superstratist, substratist, universalist and the ecology of language evolution). This section further familiarizes the reader with the basic grammatical properties of MC and situates the study within the broader frame of syntactic theory.

Chapter 2, ‘Structure of Clauses’, gives an overview of various functional elements making up the clausal architecture in MC, phenomena that are returned to in greater detail during the course of the subsequent chapters. The elements considered include TMA markers, Negation, complementizers and adverbs. Together they are taken as evidence for a series of functional projections realized above the lexical core of the sentence (i.e. VP).

In addition to the overt manifestations of clausal elements, the distribution and interpretation of null elements is also discussed in this chapter, i.e. subjects, objects and the copula. Regarding null subjects in MC, the author offers a clear description of their interpretative restrictions. As referential null subjects are typically found in languages with rich agreement inflection (Perlmutter, 1971; Taraldsen, 1978; Chomsky, 1982; Jaeggli, 1982; Rizzi, 1986), it is unsurprising that MC generally disallows these given that, like most Creoles, this language does not manifest verbal agreement. Instead, null subjects in MC are explained to yield either generic/impersonal readings or specific/existential readings depending on the aspectual and temporal specifications of the clause.

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(1a) fer rom ar kann
make rum with sugar cane
'One/people make(s) rum from sugar cane'/'Rum is made from sugar cane'. (page 37, example 36a)

(1b) pe fer rom ar kann
ASP make rum with sugar cane
'Someone/They is/are making rum from sugar cane'. (page 37, example 36b)

In essence, the analysis proposed follows [Manzini and Roussou \(2000\)](#) in including an adverbial operator in C which attracts Tense, and when this Operator is generic, the null subject receives a generic interpretation while when it is specific or existential, the subject is characterized by the latter traits:

(2) [COP_{GEN} [TP [T₀] [_{VP} fer rom arkann]]]



(3) [COP_{SPEC} [TP [T pe/ti] [_{VP} fer rom ar kann]]]



However as can be seen by the data in (1a-b), the crucial ingredient that leads to the shift in the interpretative value of the subject does not clearly stem from tense. In fact the tense marker *ti* is absent in (1a,b) where the temporal interpretation does not budge (i.e. both sentences yield a reading in the present) while the aspectual values systematically shift, in that the habitual occurs with a generic subject while the progressive occurs with an existential subject. As such, it would have been worthwhile to explore an analysis placing more emphasis on the interaction of the subject's meaning with aspect. Although the author does mention that the interpretative difference associated with null subjects must come from tense and aspect marking, his theoretical rendering of the facts does not clearly build on this observation.

Another property that the analysis does not appear to capture is the relevance of the non-specific/specific nature of the object, as shown below:

(4) repar loto / *enn loto / *loto la kot bazar
repair car/ a car/ car DET by market
'One/People repair(s) cars by the market'. (page 36, example 35)

Syea does not explain with his analysis how these properties of the object tie in with the way genericity, and in turn the generic interpretation of the subject, is computed.

In addition to clauses with null subjects, objectless clauses are also discussed in this chapter. They are shown to differ from clauses with null subjects in that they cannot occur in isolation, their interpretation is dependent on discourse antecedents and cannot be co-referential with a higher clausal argument (thus patterning with Chinese). As such, an approach in terms of topic drop and variable binding à la [Huang \(1984\)](#) is applied and re-interpreted in terms of recent minimalist discussions: i.e. an Agree relation between the null object and a topic constituent in the left periphery ([Frascarelli, 2007](#); [Sigurdsson, 2011](#)).

Chapter 3 turns to the structure of Noun Phrases. The distributive and interpretative properties of functional morphemes in the nominal domain of MC are highlighted and constraints on the overt realization of this material are linked to the notion that functional projections tend to require their specifiers to be filled if their heads are phonologically null ([Speas, 1995](#); [Koopman, 1996](#); [Giusti, 2002](#)). It is overlooked that this mechanism has already been used to account for various aspects of nominal structures in a Creole language (see [Durrleman, 2008](#) on Jamaican Creole).

The section on article agglutination in MC includes a clear presentation of the phenomenon (e.g. MC: *latab*, Fr: 'la table', Eng: 'the table'; MC *lamer*, Fr: 'la mer', Eng 'the sea') and a concise overview of previous accounts put forth to account for it. The maintaining of French articles on nouns in MC has previously been claimed to be a Bantu-influenced phenomenon, since the existence of monosyllabic nouns are rare in Bantu languages which instead make frequent use of noun classifier prefixes ([Baker, 1984](#)). Syea contrasts this proposal to that in [Grant \(1995\)](#) who "on the other hand proposes that French articles were agglutinated to avoid monosyllabic nouns in MC". Given what is reported, it is somewhat hazy how the two proposals differ. They are subsequently rejected on the grounds that "monosyllabic nouns do not **always** have an agglutinated article" (page 56). Given that the author summarizes [Baker \(1984\)](#) as explaining agglutination in terms of Bantu speakers having been "**encouraged** to maintain French articles particularly in front of monosyllabic nouns", the fact that there are exceptions to mono-syllabicity does not seem clearly to disqualify this view. Similarly, an approach in terms of a phonological motivation for agglutination is aired and discarded a little hastily. In a nutshell, this approach states that more nouns have agglutinated with the feminine definite article *la* than the masculine definite article *le* because *la* is a more perceptible syllable than *le* (i.e. the former has a strong vowel and the latter a weak

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